

Book Review: Media Practices and Protest Politics: How Precarious Workers Mobilise

by Blog Admin

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*How do precarious workers employed in call-centres, universities, and the fashion industry organise to become influential political subjects? **Media Practices and Protest Politics** reveals the process by which individuals at the margins of the labour market communicate outside the realm of institutional politics to gain recognition in the political sphere. **Nick Anstead** values **Alice Mattoni's** original examples from precarious workers' mobilizations in Italy, which explore a range of activist media practices and compare different categories of media technologies and organizations, from the printed press to alternative media.*

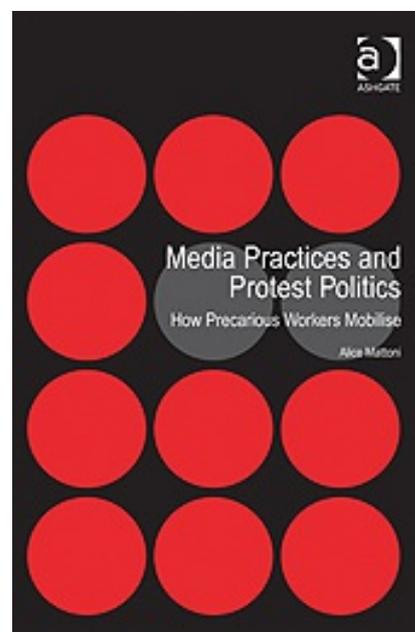


Media Practices and Protest Politics: How Precarious Workers Mobilise. Alice Mattoni. Ashgate. 2012.

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Whatever their political predilections, very few would dispute that trade unions do much good work on behalf of their members. There can also be no doubt that the big economic, political and social issues debated at the recent Trade Union Congress annual conference in Brighton were of the greatest importance. Yet to anyone tuning into the live conference coverage, the event might have seemed like a blast from the past, with [the Labour shadow Chancellor being booed from the conference floor](#) and [talk of mounting a general strike](#).

The extent that these images genuinely reflect the contemporary trade union movement is certainly questionable, but their anachronistic feel does neatly highlight the challenges of contemporary labour politics. The decline of trade union power from its high-water mark in the 60s and 70s has numerous causes. In the UK, legislation outlawing sympathy strikes and secondary picketing, as well as requiring membership ballots for strike action to be legal has had a huge impact. However, more broadly and in many countries in the developed world, social and work patterns have changed in a manner that seemed to challenge the way labour had traditionally organised. This is why Alice Mattoni's new book, focused on the political mobilisation of precarious workers in Italy, is a timely and important intervention.



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As in many countries, the last two decades have seen consensus among Italian politicians on both the left and the right regarding the virtues of flexible labour markets. The benefit of this position, it is claimed, is a more responsive labour supply, better able to rapidly adjust to the needs of industry. In practical terms though, these policies have meant more people working without the security and benefits offered by permanent contracts – whether they are casual workers at the Milan fashion week, call centre telephone operators, or school teachers who are fired at the end of the summer term, only to be rehired for the new academic year.

This type of precarious employment does not lend itself to traditional forms of labour mobilisation. In its place though, Mattoni argues, new forms of activism are emerging. Instead of formal institutions like unions, the primary weapons in the arsenal of this new generation of activists are media and spectacle. A good example of this type of action is [the Serpica Nara fashion show](#), a spoof catwalk event organised during the 2005 Milan Fashion Week to highlight precariousness in the fashion industry. The scale of the

operation is remarkable: setting up a fake but plausible Anglo-Japanese fashion house, then getting the organisation the necessary credentials to run a Milan show, and finally engineering a media battle between the new “fashion house” and precarious workers, before revealing the hoax to the world.

While certainly powerful and admirably ambitious, this type of activism does raise a couple of important questions. First, when would we actually be able to define it as being successful? One answer to this question offered by Mattoni focuses on the increased visibility of precarious workers created by spectacle and the consequent enhanced awareness of their plight in wider society. This argument is certainly plausible as far as it goes, but to be wholly convincing must ultimately lead to tangible political and economic benefits for the group. Second, and related, is the issue of participation. Mattoni admits that the examples examined in the volume were created by a relatively small group of very driven and politicised activists. The question therefore remains about whether these types of mobilisations can ever create a new type of mass politics among precarious workers, legitimately able to claim to represent the interests of hundreds of thousands of people.

Yet, despite these questions, Mattoni’s account is highly prescient today, and might get even more so in the future. There are at least three reasons for this. First, the communication technology that has facilitated new forms of mobilisation by people without access to formal institutionalised resources like trade unions is becoming more ubiquitous. Second, for a generation of workers, especially the young across much of Europe, precariousness is becoming the new normal. For example, Mattoni cites OECD data stating that nearly half of Italian workers between the age of 15 and 24 are in precarious employment.

The final issue relates to the continuing economic crisis, and how it shapes the future path of economic and political ideology. On the other hand, the neo-liberal dogmas of recent decades, including the focus on a flexible labour market to the point of creating so many precarious workers, might come to be seen as discredited. On the other hand however, [as Colin Crouch has documented](#), neo-liberal ideologies remain remarkably resilient. Thus some governments may respond to economic crisis with more and not less neo-liberal doctrine. As a result, it is possible to see the battle lines being drawn for new ideological battles, and there can be little doubt that new forms of political mobilisation will play a significant role in this process.

Dr Nick Anstead is Lecturer in the Department of Media and Communication at the [London School of Economics](#), where his research focuses on parties and elections, new modes of political communication and e-politics. He previously worked as Lecturer in Politics at the University of East Anglia. [Read more reviews by Nick.](#)

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